

*Sober and Religious CONFERENCE considered and
recommended.*

S E R M O N

Preached in the High-Church-Yard, Glasgow;
May 26th, 1774.

At the Ordination of the Reverend Mr JOHN BURNS,
Minister of BARONY.

To which is added,

T H E
C H A R G E.

By the Reverend WILLIAM THOM, M.A.
Minister of Govan.

G L A S G O W:

Printed for MORRISON and M'ALLUM, and sold
at their Shop, Gibson's Land, Salt-mercato
And other Bookfellers in Town and Country.

M,DCC,LXXIV.

1608/3928.



Mal. iii. 16,--18. *Then they that feared the Lord, spake often one to another, and the Lord hearkened and heard it: and a book of remembrance was written before him, for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name.*

Ver. 17. *And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them as a man spareth his own son that serveth him.*

Ver. 18. *Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God, and him that serveth him not.*

REASON and speech are the two principal faculties, by which mankind are distinguished from the animal creation; by the use of reason we find out truth, and by speech we communicate it to others.

And our nature seems to be so formed, that just reasoning enableth us to speak distinctly, and social conversation brightens and improves the faculty of reasoning.

As this is the case, an inquisitive person, may, from the bare esteem of knowledge, desire to

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converse with others; the serious and well-disposed will, moreover desire that exercise, because conference, if properly conducted, is an excellent mean of regulating our affections, and of improvement in the spiritual life.

To confer together, was therefore the habitual custom of those serious persons mentioned in the text, "Then they that feared the Lord, spake often one to another:" *Then*, when the Jewish church was exceedingly corrupted: they had lately been delivered from a tedious captivity, but they soon transgressed the commandments, and despised the ordinance of their Deliverer. Their words *were stout against the Lord*: They said, *it is vain, ver. 14 to serve God, and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of hosts?* They called *the proud happy*; yea, *they that worked wickedness were set up*, advanced to worldly honour and riches; yea, *they that tempted God by hainous sins were delivered*, delivered from the punishment which their crimes deserved: for, even then, the Judges *were partial* in their decisions, and *caused many to stumble at the law*; and therefore God threatens *to come near to them to judgment, ver. 5. and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that*

defraud the hireling in his wages, and that oppress the widow and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the Lord of hosts. Such was the profaneness, the profligacy, and iniquity of the Jews in that corrupted age ; but there was still a number *who feared the Lord* ; that is, who were sincerely religious, who were influenced by the authority of God, and studied to do his will : It is not to be doubted, that these would be at all possible pains, to reclaim the impious, the debauched and unjust among whom they lived ; but they were especially careful to fortify their own minds under the hardships they suffered ; to confirm one another in religion and goodness ; to strengthen their resolution against the dangerous infection of vice ; to have their understandings further improved in knowledge and their hearts deeper engaged in the love and practice of their duty. It was with these views, we may safely presume, that they *who feared the Lord, spake often one to another.*

On occasions of this sort, we have had many good sermons on the excellency of the gospel, the utility of public instructors, the duty of a minister, the doctrines he ought to believe, and the method by which he should convey these doctrines into the minds of his hearers.

My design in this discourse is to mention some of the advantages which Christians tolerably enlightened, as the ministers of this Church generally are, may obtain by conversing often and freely with one another; while they have the fear of God before them, and keep within the boundaries of decency and good manners. What I am to deliver, may, I think, merit some attention from students and younger brethren; and I hope, it may also be profitable to those of my other hearers, who are disposed to weigh its importance, and to behave accordingly. I will not enquire any further, whether the text be the properest foundation for the remarks I am going to make, nor shall I be very solicitous about the order in which I offer these remarks.—To begin then; I think it manifest,

First, That by free conversation, an ability of reasoning justly, is best and most successfully acquired: “Neither the laboured treatises of the learned, nor the set discourses of the eloquent, are able of themselves to teach the use of reason: it is the habit alone of reasoning, that can make a reasoner; and men can never be better invited to the habit, than when they find pleasure in it.” Nor can they ever so really find that pleasure which invites and guides to the habit of reasoning, as by conversing with

their friends. To teach us to think and reason, dry rules and directions were long ago prescribed; and some people have, from age to age, attempted to bring them in fashion: but do they who insist upon the utility of these rules and know them best, reason always with the greatest accuracy? Are not their reasonings commonly as vague, as feeble and incoherent, as those of untutored, and undisciplined people? The rules may be exact enough, and if one can reason already, they may assist him to detect quibbles, and from being imposed upon by the jargon of words, or the specious sophistry of argument: but one may safely venture to affirm that, to this day, these rules have never in any instance, taught the young mind to reason correctly. It was indeed the height of folly to expect that they could ever have that effect. Is a child taught to walk by speeches and directions from his nurse? Or, is a person taught to swim, by full and accurate discourses upon the whole art of swimming? It is incontestibly by exercise and habit, that the first is taught to walk, and the other to swim: and, in like manner, it is by reasoning, that a habit of reasoning justly is acquired. Conversation whettens the mind; and, as *iron sharpeneth iron, so doth a man the mind and countenance of his friend.* For,

In the Second place, Frequent conference with one another, hath a strong and direct tendency to improve the mind in human and divine knowledge; perhaps a stronger tendency, than any thing else. In comparison of it, or at least without being assisted by it, the study of books is but a languid and fruitless affair. Conference warms us, it exerciseth us, and at the same time, instructs us. When we confer with a sensible man, he presseth hard upon us, he woundeth us on every side, his imagination raiseth up ours to a more than ordinary pitch: stimulated by jealousy, by glory, by contention, we are elevated to something above ourselves: the soul is roused from its lethargy, and all its strength is exerted: the air, the looks and countenance of him we converse with keep it on the stretch: and, frequently, before one word hath been said on a subject about which we were in the dark, we have a clearer and fuller view of it than ever we had formerly: light breaks in suddenly upon the mind, before our fellow-enquirer hath so much as spoken; and in a manner which is real, and felt, though I confess, not easily or shortly to be explained, we see and know at once, what we wonder we did not see before. — In the progress of the conference, the difficulty is proposed, the question is stated, a cloud of words which hide the subject is removed, the simple truth appears, clear and

striking views of it become obvious, the mind is enlightened, we acquire new and valuable knowledge, and rejoice in the new and pleasing acquisition. We may weary ourselves in poring over many bulky and tiresome volumes for months or years, and not attain so much real knowledge as we might receive with pleasure in a few hours by a spirited conversation with a man of judgment; and why should we depend on books only for that knowledge, the seeds of which we have within ourselves; seeds which may be cherished by conversing with our friends, and gradually nurtured up to maturity by the counterwarmth of impartial and friendly debate.

That by conference we may acquire the most clear and distinct view of things, I might further shew, by many particular considerations: for instance, read over to a child any story, read it to him in the plainest manner, he doth not, he cannot understand it; tell me, he says, what it is you have read: speak it over to him face to face, as in familiar conversation, and he then understands it at once. The case is much the same with men, whether in early or in mature years: by familiar conversation they apprehend things the most easily; by the *living language* their attention is attracted, and a clearer and more distinct notion of a subject is conveyed to them than

they are able to receive from books where that same subject is fully and perhaps methodically treated *. Besides, there is science, which, if we have either discovered ourselves, or, if we have got it in books only, we cannot, all at once, depend upon it: It may seem very plausible; it is new to us, and it is entertaining: but we hesitate to embrace it hastily: We suspect it may be erroneous, till having consulted our more enlightened friends, we find what is its sterling value by

* Accurate memorials *read* in civil or ecclesiastical courts, are tiresome and little attended to; but when a *speaker* rises, he attracts attention, and conveys ideas. —The like difference is observed between sermons *read* in pulpit, and those which are *spoken* or delivered: —From its having been observed, that instruction is more successfully conveyed by *speaking*, than it is acquired by *reading*; public teachers were at first appointed, and are still continued, though most of the arts and sciences are fully treated of in books:—Ancient philosophers taught their scholars by *conversing* familiarly with them in walks, in gardens, in porticoes:—Several people complain, that, in our age, education is too much carried on by reading and books, and too little by conversation; the fatigue of study, and the awkwardness, the parade and obscurity of writers, oftentimes disgust the student, whom the communications of an able teacher would conduct to knowledge. Socrates trained Alcibiades, Plutarch educated Trajan; and if the ancient method of education by familiar conference were pursued, it need not be such a prodigy in modern times to meet with a tutor, who can form or educate a gentleman. See Horat. lib. 2. Sat. 4. at the end, *Docte Cati, &c.*

the touch-stone of conversation. This hath often been experienced by inquisitive persons in the younger time of life.

I have said that conference is an excellent means of attaining knowledge; I think also that it puts a person in the fairest way to be convinced of his erroneous opinions and to part with them: it oftentimes happens, that when one studies in solitude he embraceth wild and fantastical opinions; conversation opens his views and gives his faculties a vigorous play; it puts him upon turning his notions on every side, and holds them up to a light which discovers those mistakes that might have remained hid from him in the gloom and obscurity of retirement: enlightened by debating with his friends, he is convinced that, by a bias to which indeed all men are liable, he had bended his opinions to suit his inclinations; he candidly renounceth these opinions, and cheerfully submits to the striking evidence of truth.

I add, that the knowledge acquired and improved by conference is the most methodical, the most profitable, and it sticks the fastest with us. What we get by reading, unless we recollect and converse it over, is oftentimes almost as soon forgotten as read: and I believe every one will find, upon reflection, that the most valuable parts of

knowledge he is possessed of, have been acquired not so much by books as in company, or he was set in pursuit of it by hints from some friend, or he applied to it with a view to make a proper figure in company, and conversation hath convinced him of its value, hath enabled him to digest it into order and of course hath made him to remember it. I do not deny that there are many who by reading have attained a great variety of knowledge; but, commonly, it is a dark, a jumbled and confused knowledge: they know, but they know without a method and without a plan; their thoughts are unconnected, and their knowledge undigested. This confusion in thinking may be partly owing to other causes, but it is unquestionably, in a great measure, owing to this, that these poring scholars have been too seldom in company, they have not by conference, learned to arrange their thoughts in a proper order. —When I say this, I suppose, as I have all along done, that those who may hope to improve their minds by conference, have a real desire of knowledge and are careful both to read and to meditate in their retirements. To seek for improvement in solitude and company alternately, is the proper way to increase our stock of knowledge and to have distinct views of things. The knowledge which is acquired in our ordinary companies at least, (and not in those of scholars)

is commonly superficial: Knowledge acquired by reading only, may be deep and various, but it is for the most part apt to be somewhat confused. — These are high acquirements; — accuracy in reasoning, — advancement in knowledge, — conviction of our mistakes, — method and order in thought and expression, — keeping the best knowledge upon the memory; — which may all be had or greatly improved by conference. Should not this prospect engage us to *peak often* one to another. To acquire knowledge should be the aim of every man, and particularly, it should be the aim of Ministers of the Gospel. Whatever business a person is engaged in, he ought to be intent on making improvements in it. In companies, the farmer talks about husbandry, the merchant about trade, the politician about schemes of government, the soldier about encampments, about sieges, and battles, and retreats; different artificers, each about new and further improvements in his respective business. Shall enlightened Christians, shall ministers of the Gospel seek for no further increase in human and divine knowledge? Shall they alone remain in a drowsy and torpid state? Shall they rest satisfied as if they had already attained perfection either in knowledge or in practice.

Next to our proneness to sin, I cannot help

thinking that what we have most to regret, is, that we have not been early set upon the right road to pursue knowledge. The misfortune, I believe, is pretty general: I am sure there are many who think and feel that they have great reason to lament and complain of it. What an unbounded prospect, what an extensive field of knowledge lies before us; a field rich with every thing that is useful, and pleasing, and ornamental to the mind of man; a field of which great parts are, it is likely, never to be trodden by us: Some of which, at least, we might with pleasure have surveyed, had we been timeously set upon the right track: Is there no remedy, is there no way to retrieve this misfortune, at least, in some degree? Must we check our natural; our strong desire of knowledge? Must we be content to remain for ever fixed in the same ignorance? If there is a remedy at all, it must be fetched in a great measure from a friendly and spirited intercourse with one another. Travellers to the same, or different parts of the world, use to compare the observations they make. Why should not men, who travel in the intellectual world, if I may so speak; who are in pursuit of the same, or different parts of knowledge, do the same? Why should they not in this sense, be *willing to communicate* and willing also to learn? And may not he who justly values his great and improved talents, learn something, even from those who differ from

him, and who in many respects, are confessedly inferior to him.—Men chuse commonly to associate with those who are believed to be of the same opinions with themselves; but to converse with those who are known to differ from us, is a better method, both to find out truth, and to increase in knowledge : As by the collision of hard bodies fire is generated ; so by the opposition of sentiments in debate, reason is sharpened, and truth investigated. Decency in contradicting is to be observed ; but amongst those who know one another, and converse together for mutual improvement, there is no great occasion for much ceremony— Much ceremony mars the purpose, and is indeed nauseous. One would rather chuse to frequent the company of those who oppose and ruffle him, than of those who are scrupulously afraid to contradict him. It is a dull and hurtful pleasure to have to do with that sort of literary people, who instead of correcting our notions, insipidly smile in our face, seem to admire us, and to approve of every thing we say. I proceed to mention,

Thirdly, Another advantage derived from conference, or *speaking often to one another* ; which is, That it confirms or restores good agreement, harmony, and peace. The cause of dryness and discord amongst us is, commonly, either a suspicion of wrong principles, or of some great blemish in

moral character: these suspicions, when happily they are little more than suspicions, will be either completely removed, or at least gradually weakened by conversation and acquaintance.

We suspect one another either of wild and enthusiastic, or of lax and unsound principles: most certainly, we ought to be at the utmost pains to have sound principles in religion and morality; forming all these principles by the scriptures of truth: but though we strive ever to honestly to do so, it is impossible that the thoughts of thinking men, on some abstruse points, can be quite alike, and run exactly in the same channel: It is great weakness to expect this; it is great folly, and unreasonable severity to urge it: and when civil or ecclesiastic rulers strictly press an uniformity of belief, they counterwork their own design; by exacting too much, they gain nothing at all: nay, they drive men into hypocrisy or scepticism: there is perhaps, no religious society where the doctrine established is less sincerely believed, than in that very society, which imposeth an absolute necessity of receiving implicitly, and believing blindly, whatsoever it hath assumed the authority to declare sound and orthodox: a thinking person can never resign his understanding so entirely as to allow himself to be guided like a beast, wheresoever those in authority shall please to

lead him. Rulers may, by commands, direct our external actions; but they play the fool, the bigot, the tyrant, when they *command* us to believe. If a few hundreds of studious persons were possessed of a precise sameness of belief in every point of doctrine, this would be a wonderful thing indeed: if it did exist, it would be in the judgment of a superior Being, a greater miracle than ever was exhibited. Consult the history of the Christian Church, the history of Popish countries, and you will find that the rigorous imposing and exacting a strict sameness of belief, hath commonly produced scepticism, infidelity, loathing at religion, and sometimes, I fear, atheism itself: in this respect therefore, very considerable latitude hath been allowed in well regulated societies, Jewish and Christian: but perhaps we of this reformed Church, differ less in our manner of thinking, than in our turn of expression; or if some do really differ, the difference is overlooked, and passeth for nothing, whilst they keep up a manly familiarity, and friendly acquaintance. Did it ever happen, that a man was severe against the heterodoxy of one with whom he kept up a good understanding? Was it ever known that a friend was extremely disgusted with the principles of his friend, whilst the friendship lasted? The misfortune is, we first suspect a man's principles, and then we avoid him; we avoid him still, and the suspicion grows; we pore upon, and

it sticks fast with us : Had men of seemingly different opinions, always met and explained themselves, their differences, at least in material points, would very often have appeared to be much about words, and many idle wranglings and disputes which have made so much noise in the world, and swelled the heavy volumes of ancient and modern times, would, to the unspeakable advantage and honour of Christianity, never have been heard of.

To *speak often one to another* doth also procure mutual peace, as it removes secret grudges, and the suspicions we are apt to entertain about the moral character of one another : a man's sincerity, or the purity of his morals, are often suspected when there is little or no ground for any such suspicion ; we have been misinformed, and have taken up an ill report against him : our not having acquaintance with him, is the cause why we think ill of him ; when we come to know a little above the springs of his actions, and the tenor of his conduct, we often discover our mistake, and begin to think better of him. We are scared at a man's supposed temper and vices ; we converse with him and our fear abates : oftentimes, the vices and defects which those we are strangers to are charged with, are like those objects which appear deformed and terrible at a distance,

but when we have approached them their deformity and terribleness disappear: how common a thing is it to entertain a bad opinion of men, which, upon a little acquaintance, we see was groundless? This happens every day, and it should make us cautious and slow to think ill of any person with whom we are but little acquainted; and if we have ill thoughts of him, we should try if they may not be removed by striking up an acquaintance, and conversing with him. I proceed,

Fourthly, Another great advantage which the fearers of God derive from conference is, growth and improvement in the spiritual life. To this end it must indeed be wisely conducted: the words we hear in conversation, have a surprising influence upon the turn of the mind, the feelings of the heart, and our behaviour in life. How often hath an impure hint, perhaps unmeaningly thrown out, polluted the mind of the hearer, given rise or growth to disorderly appetites or passions, which have, soon after, been exerted into action, and issued in his remorse and shame. When this happens to be the case, hath not the unwary speaker reason of deep mourning and regret, and hath not the unfortunate hearer reason to repent that ever he was in such company, though it may have been that of his near relative.

ons or intimate friends? Might it not be an effectual check to all such dangerous conversation, did the speaker pause a little, and consider, What mischief may this word, this story occasion? What sin may be committed in the consequence of it? What shame, what punishment may some unstable person be brought to suffer by it? — How often also, and I speak it with pleasure, how often hath a simple hint, raised and cherished the devout and friendly affections, — caught hold of a man who was tottering, and just upon the verge of falling into some foul transgression, — been the means of establishing him in virtue, and fixing him in a laudable and Christian course of action? Hath not many a man felt the emotions of gratitude stirring in his breast, by being put in mind of God's loving kindness toward him? Even an accidental expression concerning the excellency of religion, and the surpassing love of Jesus, or concerning the dignity, the reality and beauty of virtue, amidst all the present corruption and dissipation of the world, is often, not without effect. It awakens in the soul admiration, and love to God; it kindles a warm desire of virtue in the heart of the hearer, and cherishes that same desire in the heart of the speaker: how often hath soft persuasion pacified wrath, and stemmed the impetuous tide of passion? How often hath it excited pity and commiseration, and

allayed the hoisterous intention of revenge and cruelty? How often have the words and countenance of a friend, cooled the boilings of passion, —made a person to controul his criminal desires,—to alter his purpose, and preserve his innocence? How beautiful, how forcible and salutary, are such right words, how studiously to be spoken, how faithfully to be remembered? “ A
 “ wholesome tongue is a tree of life,—a word fitly
 “ spoken, is like apples of gold in pictures of sil-
 “ ver,—the words of the wise are as goads, and as
 “ nails fastened in sure places by the masters of
 “ the assemblies; let therefore no corrupt commu-
 “ nication proceed out of your mouth, but that
 “ which is good to the use of edifying; be ye filled
 “ with the Spirit, speaking among yourselves mu-
 “ tually; let the word of Christ dwell in you rich-
 “ ly, in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one
 “ another.”

Were we disposed to so salutary an exercise, we could be at no loss for materials to converse upon, which have a direct tendency to our mutual improvement in the spiritual life,—to warmour hearts with the love of God, and with the love of one another,—to give us the command of our passions, and to bend us to the practice of righteousness. Might we not discourse on the nature and beauty of every christian virtue, the obligations to the practice of it, derived from the light

of nature, and the farther obligations to it, from the Gospel of Christ; by this means would we not learn to have clear and precise notions of every virtue, and would we not be the better able to recommend virtue, in all its particular branches, to the choice and pursuit of one another? Would not serious conversation on such subjects, cherish the devout affections, inspire us with the love of God, and teach us resignation to his will? Did we in the fear of God, *speaking often one to another*, concerning the compassion and love of Christ to a perishing world, would not our hearts burn within us, whilst we meditated and spoke of him? Would not our faith in him be strengthened, our love increased, and our hearts inflamed with a strong desire to resemble and obey him? By conversing about the glories of the other world, would we not learn to bear, with contentment, the ills of this life, and to become more indifferent with respect to its transient joys? Would we not by divine grace, behave in the whole of our conduct, as *seeing him who is invisible*? Would we not believe and feel the eternal world to be as real as if we already beheld it with our eyes, and would we not gradually be more and more influenced by that *faith which is the substance of things not seen, and the evidence of things hoped for*? And would we not have to say, from comfortable experience, *This is the victory*

that overcometh the world, even our faith. In short, by serious and religious conference, what great improvements in goodness, might we make? Would we not become better men and better Christians, advancing to the measure of the stature, of the fulness of Christ?—Edified by different friends, we would have it to say, in imitation of the virtuous and thoughtful Roman emperor, “From this man I first learned to think reverently of God, and of his righteous administration; from that man I learned submission to the will of providence, and the art of contentment in every condition of life: by one, I was taught to have a relish for the beauty of manners, to perceive the dignity and reality of virtue, and the beauty of holiness; by another, I was taught, through divine grace, to bridle my passions, to be easily reconciled to those who had offended me, to set a due value upon the virtues of others, to make allowance for their imperfections and sincerely to love them: by the great pains which one friend took upon me, my mind was gradually opened, and at length I had a ravishing view of the Gospel scheme of salvation; by another I learned to see the vanity of worldly pleasures, to study the art of self-recollection, to be intent upon mine own improvement, and to aim at Christian perfection.” And we might have it to add, with the same devout and illustrious writer, I owe it to

the providence of God, that ever I was acquainted with such persons.

And here, one cannot but lament the false delicacy and corruption of Christians in the present age, which in some respects is sunk into degeneracy, even below the state of the Heathen world: Heathens when they met together, used to discourse concerning the nature of virtue, the chief happiness of man, the being and providence of their supposed gods; they talked of their supreme divinity; with him they began, with him they ended, of him too were their songs. How different from this is the temper and practice of Christians, with respect to the true God, in whom they pretend to believe? I speak not of nominal Christians; of them it is to be feared, that God is not in all their thoughts, for he is not in their mouths, unless when they blaspheme him; I speak of those who make some profession of being Christians; when a company of such convene, how are they employed? Why those who have ridiculously usurped to themselves the stile of good company, call for the gaming table, and from dissipation or avarice, waste the precious hours in a dull round of insipid play.—Hence the unbecoming, the lamentable and growing ignorance of that class of people: an abuse of company! a murdering of time, which I trust

will ever be discountenanced by the Clergy of Scotland.—And on a chearful, or a grave occasion, where gaming is improper, what do our fashionable people talk about? If one of the company happens to speak of God, or religion, or providence, or a future state, he is almost thought to have fallen into an impropriety of behaviour, and to have transgressed the rules of good breeding; nay, swayed, it seems, by the fashion of the age, even the teachers of wisdom and righteousness, if they happen to be in company with their hearers or scholars after the solemn lecture or discourse is delivered, seldom speak a word about what they have been publicly engaged in. just as if they were ashamed to appear wise and good, or suspected that, if they ventured to converse on a grave subject, their lameness might be detected; not only spiritual subjects are jostled out of conversation, but scarce any thing that is manly or sensible is admitted into it: so that unless there be some piece of frivolous news, or if some stroke of wit or pleasantry, or of impertinent banter and ridicule is not fallen upon, the company are drowsy and half asleep; they yawn and stare at one another; they are silent and have nothing to say. Such is commonly our behaviour in company, and such *was* the behaviour of men in ancient times.

Hence it is, that the instructive works concern-

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ing religion and morality, which antiquity hath transmitted down to us, and which will be the study, the wonder and the entertainment of men of erudition, while the world lasts, are written in form of dialogue or conference, and in that form they appear quite easy and natural; because they, in fact, discoursed about such things and are in those writings represented to the life; but should we attempt to write any thing grave in that form, it would appear altogether unnatural and forced; it would be a contradiction to the present manners: because it is rarely that any serious subject is canvassed in our modern conversations.

One cause of this false delicacy and abuse of company, may perhaps be that in the last age, and later too perhaps, people talked of spiritual things who had too little discretion, or had narrow views, or were of a factious and party spirit, or were actuated by low and worldly designs; but because a good thing hath been unhappily abused, shall it afterwards be for ever avoided? Will not those who fear God confer with one another, and by a prudent use of so edifying an exercise, strive to rescue it from disrepute, and bring it once more in fashion. And if sensible and religious conversation were again counted polite and fashionable, we need not fear but it would be cultivated.

I cannot help thinking that, if ever a general reformation of the world shall take place, the way of conversing in companies will be much altered from what it is at present. This may be the effect of the world's being reformed, but it may also surprisingly contribute to it as a cause.

It is not necessary or even expedient, that the sincere fearers of God should *speak to one another* about spiritual things only. Divine objects, if long and stedfastly beheld, must needs impair and weaken the sense of mortals. The conversation may be varied; it may at times be turned to other parts of knowledge which are both pleasing and profitable, and still there may be room enough left for innocent mirth and gaiety.

The above are advantages which all men who have discretion and some degree of knowledge, such as the public instructors of religion, may obtain by free conference amongst themselves: I say among themselves, or such as themselves. When we converse with those called the upper part of the world, it may not be always safe to indulge ourselves in the freedom of conversation; it may be rather proper to be somewhat upon the reserve. The prudent will often keep silence, and keep in his tongue with a bridle: and it would be indelicate to say, how much frequent

converse with mean, poor, and uninstructed people, which by humanity and religion, and our office we are obliged to, flattens the spirit, corrupts the taste, and is apt to hurt the temper.

I might add, that from friendly conference, men derive consolation under all the ills of life. Inquisitive and virtuous minds, in any country, are comparatively few, and commonly their condition is not opulent; but while they successfully contribute to improve the mind, enlarge the understanding, and increase the virtue and the faith of one another, they are mutually comforted and will hardly be sensible of the ills they suffer: as an illustrious band of kinsmen or brothers, they are knit together in love, and *bear one another's burdens*. And what will alleviate distress, if it is not the sympathy, the counsel, and the assistance of wise and tender hearted friends, mutually given and received? Considering themselves as strangers,—as exiles in a foreign land,—as the citizens of another country, they jointly travel homewards to the city they belong to, they interest themselves in the affairs of one another, and, like pilgrims crossing an impetuous river, they pass through life braced, as it were, in the arms of one another: mutually strengthened, and comforted, and united unto Jesus, they know they shall never perish; they stand unbended under

the pressures of life, waiting, and encouraging one another to wait, for the *end of their faith, the salvation of their souls.*

I might also have added, That there are subjects which are proper to be discussed only in private circles. Religious knowledge hath been distinguished into those points which may at all times and before all men, be fully and clearly explained; and those, which are to be very warily touched upon: the plain duties and faith of the Gospel, are the first; knotty points and controversies, which take up so much room in most theological systems, are the last; and what title hath a common audience to hear discourses on controverted points? What purpose can this serve? Why are such things offered in public? Is it, that no part of the counsel of God may be suppressed, nor the people defrauded? But you impart to them no real knowledge, you only amuse them with hard words, for they cannot judge of controversy; many of them have no opinion about those points concerning which they raise the greatest clamour; they take their notions by rebound from others. You do a thing perilous and inconvenient, you confound the distinction which the Apostle makes between *milk* and *strong meat*; you counter-act his precept, to avoid *questions and contentions*, which he says,

are *vain and unprofitable*, and *do gender strifes*; you do the people great harm, you distract their minds, and divert their attention from things that are intelligible, necessary and useful to them: and if some be so disputatious, so polemically disposed, that one way or other they must dip in controversy, it were surely more proper for them to dispute in private, with those who are capable to perceive and weigh the force of metaphysical arguments; and who will either submit to their evidence, or else return answers to them.

I pass over other great advantages to be acquired by unreserved and friendly conversation. It teacheth us to be easy, and to keep temper when we are contradicted, — it leads us into the knowledge of men and manners, — it enables us to speak of human duties with judgment and precision, — it mitigates the ills of life, and heightens its joys; — in some measure, it supplies the place of friendship, a thing so rare that we may pass through the silent, and the busy scenes of life, without ever meeting with an undisputed instance of it. — The advantages already mentioned — accuracy in thinking, — progress in the most profitable knowledge, — mutual harmony and good agreement, — growth in the spiritual life, — consolation and inward peace, are momentuous and desirable. The desire of them may well incline

those who fear God to *spake often one to another*; and if, with a sincere desire to grow in grace and knowledge, we converse with one another; if we strive for improvement, we strive not alone, nor in vain; God himself will assist us by his Spirit. When the two astonished and dejected disciples going to Emaus, communed together by the way, and reasoned concerning their Master, who three days before had been torn from them, condemned to death, and crucified; Jesus himself drew near, and went with them; he expounded unto them the scriptures concerning himself, removed their sadness, and warmed their hearts with joy; and they said one to another, *Did not our hearts burn within us, while he talked to us by the way, and opened to us the scriptures.* If our endeavours toward spiritual perfection are sincere, will not God's Spirit in like manner enlighten and assist us?—Our endeavours to be wise and good, are taken notice of, and recorded, for *when they who feared the Lord, spake often one to another, the Lord hearkened and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written for those who feared the Lord, and thought upon his name.*—The fearers of God are precious in his sight, they are his special treasure, and sure of immortal glory; *and they shall be mine, saith the Lord, in the day when I make up my jewels.*—Having the knowledge and the comfortable sense of spiritual things, the

troubles of life will fall the lighter on their heads, and God may, in his love, save them even from the chastisements which they deserve; *and I will spare them, (saith he) even as a man spareth his own son that serveth him:—*but in this life there is, with respect to prosperity and adversity and all external things, very little difference to be observed betwixt the state of the righteous, and that of the wicked. The great day of retribution approacheth, when God will sever between the sheep and the goats, between the precious and the vile; *Then shall ye return and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God, and him that serveth him not.*

May the Spirit of the Lord rest upon us, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge, and of the fear of the Lord: May he grant us to grow in grace, and that our lips may keep and disperse knowledge, and to his name be immortal praise.
AMEN.

THE CHARGE.

DEAR SIR,

IT is usual to administer some advices to young ministers in your present situation: I am perfectly sure, that in view of entering on that difficult office, which you have now accepted of, you have, *in the fear of the Lord*, by *communing with your own heart* in solitude, and by *speaking often* to your best friends, carefully formed a plan of your future conduct in private life, and how you are to discharge the several parts of your ministerial function: and indeed, it must be confessed, that if you had not done this before-hand, you could but little avail yourself of a few transient directions from this pulpit, though these should be ever so proper, and administered with ever so much warmth of friendship and affection: however, in compliance with the established practice, I shall take the liberty to offer a few things at present, to your serious consideration.

It is a happy circumstance in your settlement, that you are both presented by the Patron, and have also been the choice of the Congregation. This is the greater a proof of your prudence, and that you acquit yourself well in pulpit, as many of this people have, for a considerable time been

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personally acquainted with you, and all of them have had experience of your gift of prayer and talents in preaching.—You will retain the esteem of your Congregation by those same means by which you were so happy as to acquire it: and the Parish will no doubt expect from you an unblameableness in private behaviour, and a diligence in your public performances, which may be suitable to that cheerfulness and harmony, with which they have called you to be their Minister.

The temper, or habit of mind, which you ought uniformly to bear towards the souls of your numerous flock, should consist of pity and good will: It was pity and good will which moved your glorious Master to undertake the work of man's redemption; you cannot err in forming yourself upon so illustrious an example; *Let the same mind be in you, that was in Christ Jesus.* Pity and love to the perishing and precious souls of men, will animate you to the faithful discharge of your sacred and laborious office.

You are to be the speaker in this Congregation; and most certainly it is a great undertaking for any one, to stand up and charge himself with speaking to a numerous assembly, concerning things of infinite moment where he alone is to be listened to, and every other person is to remain

silent; for there is hardly one of his audience who is not more quick-sighted to observe the faults, than the merits of the speaker; and these faults however small or few, are like to eclipse the beauty of the discourse, and to mar the effect of all that is right and forcibly advanced. This, this, however slightly it may be thought of, is a weighty and arduous office : but be not discouraged ; God upholds and strengthens his servants.

You are to lead the devotions of this Congregation : in your prayers you speak to God in behalf of your people, and along with them.—As our Church hath not received or allowed of set forms ; prayer is often deemed to be a subaltern part of the ministerial business, and is therefore apt to be too carelessly studied ; and yet to worship God in a social manner is, or ought to be, the chief end of our assembling in public. Many judicious and devout men have wished that we had public meetings for prayer and praise only : this would be a solemn acknowledgment of our dependence on God ; and it might lead us to be at more pains in studying those prayers which are to be offered up to God in our assemblies.—You will judge it necessary to study carefully, not only the *matter*, but the *manner* also of your public prayers : you will *seek for acceptable words*, that you

may always perform this important part of your office with devotion, and with decency,

You are to preach statedly to this Congregation: in preaching you speak from God to your people; you declare the message which you have received from your Lord and Master, and if you have a sense of God habitually on your mind, and have pity and love to the perishing souls of men, *your doctrine will drop as the rain, your speech will distil as the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass:* possessed of integrity of heart and manners, and *shewing yourself a pattern of good works*, you will enforce the several doctrines of your sacred function, not with the vain pomp of shewy eloquence, but with the far more powerful persuasion of active and exemplary virtue: you will soften the severity of precept, with the ease and familiarity of conversation, and by generously mixing with the meanest committed to your care, you will insinuate the instructor under the air of the companion.

With respect to the subjects you are to preach upon, there is one obvious rule which ought to direct you, and every minister of Christ: and it is this; To preach ofteneft on those subjects which are ofteneft mentioned in the Bible, and especial-

ly in the New-Testament : these, you know, are the original and everlasting love of God, the grace of Christ to ignorant and miserable men, love to God, faith in Jesus, love to men, self-denial, and a holy conversation consisting of love, joy, peace long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, truth, justice, meekness, temperance, and other particular fruits of the Spirit. The views which the scripture gives us of the free love of God, and of the compassion of Christ to a perishing world, are proper to excite in the soul love to God, faith in the Redeemer, wonder, gratitude, and indeed every emotion and expression of faith and love.

If you lay before your people, these views of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, how can they want obedience to him, or possibly forget his love ?

You will teach them that the whole duty of man consists in yielding a chearful obedience to those two great commandments, which are the sum of the Moral Law, *Thou shalt love the Lord with all thy heart ;* and *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself* : this is the law which Christ came not to destroy, but to fulfil ; this law he came to magnify and make it honourable : every fact that is narrated, every doctrine that is revealed in the Gospel, tends to inculcate obedience to this original, ever-

lasting, and immutable law: every plan of teaching, that may tend to weaken the obligations to obey this Moral Law, is unscriptural, and must be wrong and dangerous. *Do we make void the law through faith? God forbid, yea we establish the law.*

By the harmonious Call which you have got, you will have the more confidence to declare to this people, *all the counsel of God*; in particular, to shew them that saving faith is always accompanied with a holy practice. From the corruption of nature, some people are averse to hear of the necessity of mortification, of repentance, justice, restitution, and a holy life: but *whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear*, you are, in faithfulness to your trust, wisely to declare to them the absolute necessity of those duties. As you desire that your great Master may be *always with you to the end*, you are to *teach them to observe all things whatsoever he hath commanded*. Receive this advice in the inspired words of the apostle Paul, *Our Saviour Jesus Christ gave himself for us, to redeem us from all iniquity, and purify to himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works: These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority and doctrine. This is a faithful saying, and these things I will, that thou affirm constantly, that they who have believed in God, might be careful to maintain good works; these things are good and*

profitable unto men. If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained.

Another part of your work is to visit the families in your Parish, and to visit the sick: the first is often more laborious than useful; the last is an office of humanity, of Christian compassion, and part of a minister's duty: and you will be happy in pouring the balm of consolation into the soul of the dying Christian; and in rivetting good impressions on the hearts of those who shall recover: but when you visit the sick who are also poor; and, no doubt, you will find many such in your wide and populous Parish, your breast will heave with all the feelings of compassion: when you go into the dismal cottages of the starving and dying poor, the sight of human woe, the gloomy image of hunger, of agony, of death, will strike all your senses: with a glowing pity, you will have room in your breast to take in a concern for your fellow-Christians in distress; and you will regret that it is not in your power to relieve them as you would: but when you find that they have lived by faith, you will, by encouraging them to *look unto Jesus* who hath taken away the *sling of death*, cause them to *rejoice and be glad*, that they are soon to *find the grave*: nay, your very sympa-

thising with them, will comfort them in some degree; and from the clamant view of indigence and misery, your spirit will be stirred up to *charge them that are rich in this world, that they be ready to distribute, and willing to communicate* to the necessities of the poor, in this time of general distress.

I say nothing about your conduct in Church judicatories: in this age, these Courts are less and less regarded; but when any of your ordinary people unhappily fall into those transgressions which are judged to merit the censures of the Church, you may perhaps find it prudent and tending to edification, to discuss as many of such scandals as possible, quietly in your own Session. —With respect to your appearances in higher judicatories, I have no reason to doubt but you will always follow that which is right, or appear-eth to you as such.

I conclude what I had to say to you, in the words of Paul to Timothy, proper to guide you in your private and public capacity. *I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearance and his kingdom; preach the Word, be instant in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine. Study*

*to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. Let no man despise thy youth, but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity. Give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Neglect not the gift that is in thee. Meditate on these things, give thyself wholly to them, that thy profiting may appear to all. Flee also youthful lusts, but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Watch then in all things, do the work of an Evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. Take heed unto thyself, and to thy doctrine, continue in them, for in doing this, thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee. And when you are on the verge of life, you will have to say, with that faithful servant of Christ, *The time of my departure is at hand, I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me at that day.*—Consider what I say, and the Lord give thee understanding in all things.*

The form requires, that I should also speak a few words to you of this Congregation—You have harmoniously called Mr Burns to be your Minister: you have promised him all encourage-

ment, and submission in the Lord ; you have done well; continue in this laudable spirit, continue to *receive him in the Lord with all gladness, and hold him in reputation because he labours in the work of Christ. Esteem him very highly in love for his works sake.* Nothing will so effectually encourage him, as the seeing you give evidence of your growth in grace, and in the knowledge of Christ; when he observes you living soberly, righteously, and godly, and having in all things your conversation, such as becometh the Gospel, this will encourage his heart : you will be his *glory and his joy; for what is his hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming.*

And you will give evidence of your growth in grace by the practice of sobriety, temperance, justice, and charity; and, in short, by the performance of relative duties. Let parents and children, masters and servants, rich and poor, conscientiously discharge the duties respectively incumbent upon them. In particular the rich are called upon, in this hard time, to open their hands wide to relieve the poor; who are every where greatly multiplied in number, and many, by not being employed, are in deep distress. No sight will please you so much, as the faces of men who have been made less miserable, and more happy

by your charity. To relieve them, is an evidence that you love God, and esteem the grace of the Lord Jesus; *but whoſo hath this world's good, and ſeeth his brother have need, and ſhutteth up his bowels of compaſſion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?*

And you will be guided to this Chriſtian converſation, if you live by faith, if you are devout, if you read and hear the word of God, and ſanctify the ſabbath: duties which (alas!) are too much neglected in this diſſipated age.

To be edified by public prayers, it is neceſſary that you join and enter into the ſpirit of thoſe prayers; that is, that the aspirations of your ſouls ſhould go along with the words ſpoken by your Miniſter; whether in confeſſion, in petition, or in thankſgiving and praiſe, your whole ſouls ſhould be engaged in the duty, as in the preſence of God, who ſearcheth the heart. What I now ſay is too little attended to, too ſeldom mentioned, and too little practiſed in moſt of our Congregations; and yet without it, people pray not in public at all; their bodies are preſent, but their hearts join not in the ſervice.

But a great part of your time in Church, is employed in hearing: your Miniſter is to explain

the scriptures, to convey instruction into your minds, to persuade you to a holy practice, praying you in *Christ's* stead to be reconciled to God. Come to hear the word of God, with a humble mind, sensible that you stand in need of spiritual instruction, desirous not only to learn your duty, but resolving also by God's grace, to put it in practice. The discourses you hear from the pulpit may not all be equally agreeable to you; but it is very possible that those you dislike most, may be very necessary, and, if duly improved by you, tend most to your real edification, by prevailing upon you *to deny yourselves, to take up your cross, and to follow Jesus*. In the Gospel there are given unto us, *exceeding great and precious promises*; but they are given *that by these you might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lusts*. Many of you are prone enough to lay claim to the promises and privileges of the Gospel; but some of you are unwilling, even to hear of the duties it requires. When Paul reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and bid that inspired Teacher go his way; some of our people, when they hear of the necessity of mortification, of justice, truth, meekness, love, and charity, They go away from their teachers: and there may be places where, if a pastor should venture to skim over these duties, or touch at them

only by the bye, he might render himself wonderfully popular, and draw town and country after him.—But your Minister dareth not to do so, because he knows, that if he should thus *seek to please men*, he *should not be the servant of Christ*. He will preach faith, but he will insist particularly on practice: in preaching Christ he will *warn every man, and teach every man in all wisdom, that he may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus*. He will *please you for your good, to edification*: and if you aim at eternal life, why should any gospel-truth displease or disgust you? Will you act like a foolish man attacked with a desperate disease, who grasps at the sweet potion, but rejects the bitter remedy which, the physician tell him, is absolutely necessary to save his life.——These discourses which pierce you to the heart; which shew you your corruption, your faults and your follies; which alarm your consciences, and set you all a-stir; which, through divine grace, are the means of humbling you, and causing you apply to God for the renovation of your nature by the Holy Ghost; these, these are the discourses which, however unwelcome they may be, are likely to awaken you out of that security which leads on to everlasting destruction.—And when you come in a devout temper prepared to hear the word of God, when you listen to it with reverence and attention; when you lay it up in your hearts,

and go home from Church in silence, in a sober and thoughtful frame; your spiritual improvement is then begun, and God will by his Spirit carry it onwards to perfection, for you may be *confident of this very thing, that he that hath begun a good work in you, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.*

Finally, my brethren, that you may derive advantage from the public ministrations of your Pastor, exercise yourselves habitually in prayer; family prayer and secret prayer: by prayer *our Gospel will come unto you, not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost*: through this Spirit, the word of God will penetrate your souls: It will not be a *dead letter, but quick and powerful, and sharper than a two-edged sword.* By the Spirit to be obtained by your praying to God in the name of Christ, you will be disposed to receive the Gospel *not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh in them who believe.* The discourses you hear from the pulpit, are like seeds sown in your hearts; and as seeds scattered on the ground do not grow up to maturity but as they are cherished by the benign warmth of the sun; so it is the enlivening operation of the Spirit, which gives efficacy to the Word preached.—If you strive and pray for spiritual improvement, and *follow on to know the Lord,*

the Spirit of God will come unto you *as the rain, as the former and the latter rain* upon the parched ground. But whilst you pray for your own advancement in grace and knowledge, neglect not to pray for your Minister also; *I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with him, in your prayers to God for him. He watcheth for your souls, pray for him as for one who must give account, that he may do it with joy, and not with grief. Pray for him in the Spirit, watching thereunto, with all perseverance, that utterance may be given him, that he may open his mouth boldly, that he may speak as he ought to speak, to make known to you, the mystery of the Gospel.*——Thus united to your Pastor in Christian love, striving and persevering in the same great design, you and he will pass through the wilderness of life, mutually comforting one another; and being by the grace of God kept from falling, you will at length be *presented faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy. Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober and hope to the end, for grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.* And, without this hope, what is there in the world that can comfort us? Without it, every prospect is dreary, dark, and gloomy; without it, our being is vain, and life is but a dream: but blessed be God, *life and immortality are brought to light in the*

the Gospel ; there remaineth a rest for the people of God ; Christ hath purchased for us a kingdom ; a kingdom that cannot be moved : for God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ ; who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him.

“ Now the God of peace that brought again
 “ from the dead, our Lord Jesus, that great Shep-
 “ herd of the sheep, through the blood of the e-
 “ verlasting covenant, make you perfect in every
 “ good work to do his will, working in you that
 “ which is well-pleasing in his sight through Jesus
 “ Christ ; to whom be glory for ever and ever,
 “ AMEN.”

F I N I S.



